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# Economic and Social Council

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**Commission on the Status of Women**
**Fifty-ninth session**
9-20 March 2015
**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"**

## Statement submitted by United Nations Foundation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

14-66631 (E) 200115

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## Statement

Access to clean cooking energy is a critical global gender issue cutting across several Beijing Platform for Action areas of concern; it is especially important for achieving success in the areas of (1) women and health, (2) women and poverty, (3) women and the environment, and (4) women and the economy.

Daily, millions of women and girls around the world breathe in harmful smoke while cooking and spend hours walking far distances to secure cooking fuel. Exposure to household air pollution from dangerous, inefficient, and polluting cooking practices kills over 4 million people annually, while millions more suffer from cancer, pneumonia, heart and lung disease, blindness, and burns (World Health Organization 2012). 3 billion people, or 40 per cent of the world, relies on traditional use of biomass for cooking. The rural poor, mostly women, largely only have access to fuels that are inefficient in converting to energy (International Center for Research on Women 2010).

In sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, the lack of access to clean cooking solutions is particularly significant, with a third of the urban population and the vast majority of the rural poor using solid fuels to cook their daily meals over open fires or inefficient stoves. Lack of access to cooking fuel forces women and children to spend many hours gathering fuel — up to 5 hours per day — or spend significant household income purchasing fuel. Women provide 91 per cent of households' total efforts in collecting fuel and water (Mehretu and Mutambira 1992), and women have an average working day of 11-14 hours, compared to 10 hours on average for men (ENERGIA 2006). A reduction in time spent collecting fuel and cooking enables women to spend more time with their children, complete other responsibilities, enhance existing economic opportunities, pursue income-generating or educational opportunities, and/or for leisure activities and rest — all of which contribute to poverty alleviation. A recent study in South Asia, commissioned by the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, showed that women who adopted improved cookstoves reported sending their children to school more often, decreased drudgery, improved health, and time savings (Practical Action 2014).

Additionally, reliance on biomass for cooking contributes to climate change, deforestation, soil erosion, and 26 per cent of global black carbon emissions (US Environmental Protection Agency 2012). Rural women are especially vulnerable to these environmental impacts. As forests are depleted, the energy burden increases and women are forced to walk even further to collect fuel or use more toxic fuels, such as dung or trash. This increased labour is almost always unpaid and uncounted as formal labour.

While women are disproportionately impacted by these issues, they are not just victims. They play a crucial role in the widespread adoption and use of clean household cooking solutions because of their central responsibility for managing household energy and cooking. As consumers and users, women are a critical component of the sector's effort to reach scale. Women must be fully integrated into the process of designing products and solutions because without their opinions and input, products will not meet their needs and will not be used.

Women can catalyse the market as clean energy entrepreneurs by leading efforts that seek to develop effective, culturally-appropriate, and sustainable solutions. A recent Kenyan study by Johns Hopkins University found that women

cookstove entrepreneurs sold 3 times many cookstoves as their male peers when given the same level of training and support (Shankar et al 2014). This research demonstrated that women can effectively become engaged as cookstove entrepreneurs and, in fact, may be preferred candidates for this type of work. Additionally, women's networks can provide access to consumers in hard-to-reach markets and women distributors can better understand the needs of women and more easily approach their clients (Batliwala and Reddy, 1996).

The Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves is working to ensure that cookstove and fuel enterprises utilize gender-informed business models in order to ensure effectiveness and sustainability, as well as strengthen and scale gender and empowerment impacts. Best practices and tools for engaging women and addressing gender issues can be found in the Alliance's Resource Guide on Scaling Adoption of Clean Cooking Solutions through Women's Empowerment.

Although stakeholders have decades of implementation experience and hundreds of organizations are active in the sector, enterprises have not adequately leveraged opportunities to empower women throughout the value chain, as well as leveraged their strengths and contributions to scaling the clean cooking sector. Resources are needed to develop effective business models that empower women and utilize women's entrepreneurship in the household energy sector, and advance the sector through the exchange of game-changing ideas and lessons learned from successful and failed innovations.

Finance and capacity building support for enterprises are also necessary to scale the number of women entrepreneurs and strengthen empowerment impacts. Agency-based empowerment training can significantly increase women's capacity to engage effectively within the clean cooking value chain (Shankar et al 2014). Additionally, evaluation and knowledge-sharing are critical in order to ensure the replication of effective business models for creating, sustaining, and scaling gender-informed approaches, women's entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment.

Many gains have been made over the past 20 years for women and girls, but they remain on the frontlines — the first responders to some of life's most difficult and dangerous moments. They are the first to feel the impacts of poverty — which is exacerbated by not having access to household energy. They are the first to be removed from school if firewood collection needs to be done, who walk farther and farther distances carrying extremely heavy loads when deforestation occurs, and are forced to inhale the thick toxic smoke emitted during cooking.

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## Statement submitted by Association of War-Affected Women, Guild of Service, Mama Zimbi Foundation, Widows for Peace through Democracy and Women for Human Rights, Single Women Group, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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14-66632 (E) 200115

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## Statement

Widowhood issues must no longer be ignored, but must be strongly addressed in reviewing implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Women for Human Rights single women group, a partner of the International Non-Governmental Organization Widows for Peace through Democracy, works to promote the status of widows in Nepal, and acts as the Secretariat for the South Asian Network for Empowering Widows in Development, which is the network for widows' organizations of the six countries in the region.

Widows are never mentioned in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, although each one of the twelve critical areas has relevancy to their low status, poverty, exclusion, discrimination, and vulnerability to exploitation and violence. Millions of uncounted widows, of all ages, from child widows, to young mothers and elderly grandmothers across the world experience exclusion, stigma, violence and injustice.

Their plight is especially critical now in war-torn countries and in those developing countries where patriarchal interpretations of religion, custom and tradition deny women and girls their fundamental human rights, brand widows as "inauspicious" and regard them as chattels, beyond the protection of modern laws.

Today, twenty years after the 4th World Conference for Women, the numbers of widows and wives of the "disappeared" have increased exponentially, due to armed conflict, revolutions, sectarian violence, harmful traditional practices, HIV and AIDS and now Ebola.

In the Middle East region the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has created thousands of new widows and orphans dependent on them. In Syria and Iraq, as we write, widows, without any male adult to protect them, are being abducted, forced into prostitution, sexual slavery and concubinage. Widows and their children predominate among refugees and internally displaced people.

Moreover, in many developed countries, widows, especially elderly widows, live in poverty, isolation and without dignity or respect. Their pensions are barely adequate to sustain them at an acceptable and decent level and they are also the victims of neo-liberal austerity cuts.

However, there is little reliable data on widowhood, for example, the numbers, ages, social support systems, coping strategies, vulnerability to violence (within and outside the family), nor on access to justice. Governments need to work with widows' organisations to fill this gap. Such statistics are vital to galvanise governments into positive policies for widows.

Discriminatory interpretations of traditional, customary and religious codes deprive them of the rights they should enjoy under modern and international laws, such as the United Nations Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Rights of the Child and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

In spite of the intense efforts of many women's non-governmental organizations who have attended previous sessions of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women to get references to widows in previous Agreed Conclusions, and for "marital status" to be added to the criteria for the disaggregation of data, this has not occurred. This uncounted silenced category of

women has been grossly neglected by many governments and the international community.

It is vital, therefore, that the review of implementation of the Platform for Action at this 59th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women recognises the urgency to address the complex cross-cutting widowhood issues, so that governments will address widows' needs in the context of poverty, human rights, access to justice, and elimination of violence. It must recognise and support, using all available means, widows' crucial roles in their families and communities as sole supporters of children and other dependants, and as key contributors to the economic and social fabric of society generally.

We draw to the attention of Member States some aspects of widows' lives in the context of the twelve critical areas of concern which they should address:

Women and poverty: Widows are among the poorest of poor women, due to lack of rights to inheritance, land, property, employment, credit, and services. Widowhood is a root cause of poverty across the generations and must be addressed through the post 2015 Millennium Development Goals.

Education and training of women: Widows' marginalisation, illiteracy, forced immobility and oppression under harmful traditional practices bars them from accessing training and employment. The most common first survival strategy of poor widows is to remove their children — girl children first — from school. Widows' daughters are thus deprived of their fundamental rights to education and are most at risk of early forced marriage, leading to early child widowhood.

Women and health: Widows suffer disproportionately in the context of both physical and mental health, due to extreme discrimination both within the family and in the community. Isolation, poor nutrition, physical and mental abuse, harmful mourning and burial rites, lead to low life expectancy, depression, and suicide.

Violence against women: The blanket of silence on widowhood violence must be lifted. Widows often experience physical, sexual and psychological violence at the hands of family members, and as unprotected women in society at large, especially when they are minority women, or are refugees and internally displaced people, migrants, and asylum seekers. Widows and their daughters are prime targets for rape and are vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation, for example, by traffickers. Widows, accused of witchcraft, may be stoned or beaten to death.

Women and armed conflict: Conflict created uncounted millions of widows and wives of the "disappeared", and widows predominate in camps for refugees and internally displaced people. They need to be represented at all peace tables, and seen as key actors in post-conflict resolutions. Widows, as survivors of massacres, who may also be rape victims, need protection and support as witnesses in war crime tribunals, and require specific actions to assist them to rebuild their lives through restorative justice processes.

Women and the economy: Widows predominate in the informal economy, and their economic contributions are not recognised.

Women in power and decision-making: It is vital that widows' voices are heard by government, so as to influence policy making. Therefore support should be given to widows to form their own associations so they have a collective voice. Widows

need to be represented in peace tables in context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions on Women, Peace and Security.

Institutional mechanism for the advancement of women: National Machineries for the Advancement of Women must include in their membership Widows' organisations as one of the categories of women who experience particular forms of discrimination requiring specific policies to respond to their needs and support their roles.

Human rights of women: Widowhood is one of the most neglected of all human rights and gender issues. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has not been effective in relation to widows' rights. On a daily basis many widows suffer violations to their rights and have no real access to justice through the courts.

Women and the media: Widows are mainly portrayed as elderly, or portrayed as powerless victims, and rarely shown in their key roles in their families and communities.

Women and the environment: Widows are not involved in decision-making on land use, conservation and access to clean water. But they are often farmers or dependent on farming, fishing or sustainable gathering for survival.

The girl child: Daughters of widows are commonly removed from school to care for younger siblings, or to be sold or married early to older men, thereby creating more young widows. They may be forced into begging and prostitution to support their mothers. Along with their widowed mothers, they face barriers to inheritance.

Finally, in this Statement, we repeat our appeal to the United Nations Secretary-General, given the huge numbers of widows and wives of the disappeared in so many regions, to appoint a United Nations Representative on widowhood and approve the drafting of a United Nations Resolution on widowhood.